

Frequent DBQ Mistakes

Teachers:

This document has two purposes in mind. It can be a tool to show your students what the most common errors are in writing a DBQ, and it can also be used as a time saver while grading.

In my experience, most of the comments I make on my students' essays are the same handful of comments caused by the same handful of errors. As I write my comments in the margins for the umpteenth time I've often thought it would be nice to have a "stamp" that would say, "This essay suffers from common mistakes #2, #5, & #6." Rather than reinvent the wheel with each and every paper, I thought, "What if students had a list of the most common mistakes? Then I could just write a comment that says, "Mistakes #3 & #7, along with encouraging comments on the essay's good qualities..

I DON'T want to suggest that we should treat students or their essays in an impersonal, "assembly line" mentality. I strive to write customized comments on every essay, but hopefully this tool might both help the quality of your students' writing, and reduce the time you spend grading.

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Question: Based on the following documents, analyze the responses to the spread of Buddhism in China. What additional kind of document(s) would you need to evaluate the extent of Buddhism's appeal in China?

Historical Background: Buddhism, founded in India in the sixth century B.C.E., was brought to China by the first century C.E., gradually winning converts following the collapse of the Han dynasty in 220 C.E. Buddhist influence continued to expand for several centuries. Between 220 C.E. and 570 C.E. China experienced a period of political instability and disunity. After 570 C.E., the imperial structure was restored.

Category	Mistake		How to Fix It
Pre-Writing Organization	PWO	Not reading the question to know EXACTLY what it is asking.	<p>Essays are difficult to do, especially under pressure in limited time. Taking 5+ minutes to organize your thoughts helps in several ways: 1) It will focus your thesis directly on the question, rather than some tangent; 2) Your essay will be a 2nd draft, while your pre-writing notes act as a mental "1st draft"; 3) You can think of specific examples to support your thesis/argument.</p> <p>Read the question several times. What is it asking? What words seem important in guiding how you organize your response? Are there any categories that lend themselves to organizing your response? Plan More, Write Less</p>
Historical Background	HB	Ignoring or not using the historical background information.	<p>The HB info is designed to HELP YOU! You don't know what the DBQ will ask, right? You're thinking to yourself, "How can they possibly expect me to remember everything I've learned all year?" Well, the HB info is there to refresh your memory, to give you clues as to how to structure your essay, what information is important, and place the question in the larger context of all you've learned.</p> <p>With this specific DBQ question, the HB information practically outlines a chronological structure for you: 1) Buddhism gradually wins converts following the collapse of the Han dynasty; 2) Buddhist influence continues to expand during the period of political instability and disunity; 3) Imperial structure is restored in 570 C.E.</p> <p>Can you anticipate likely comparisons or contrasts? (e.g. "Contrast the Chinese responses to Buddhism during the period of political instability and disunity to the responses after imperial structure was restored.." "How did the political status of China affect Chinese attitudes toward Buddhism?")</p>

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1 Thesis	1A	No Thesis		Pre-writing organization. Read the question, then plan/outline your response <u>before</u> you begin to write.
	1B	Thesis not related to the question	<i>Most Chinese are Buddhists. China has over a billion people today. Buddhists like to meditate ...</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on the language of the question: <u>verbs</u>, <u>adjectives</u>, and <u>time frame</u>.¹ (Analyze ≠ Describe ≠ Justify ≠ Trace.) If the question asks only about <u>economic</u> issues, make sure you confine your response to purely economics. If it asks about 1450-1750, don't write about 1375 or 1800.
	1C	Thesis just repeats or paraphrases the question	<i>There were many responses to the spread of Buddhism in China.</i>	Try to “argue” your thesis. Could you take an “opposite” position? If not, then the thesis doesn't really <i>say</i> anything.
	1D	Thesis is too vague	<i>Buddhism had a large impact on China.</i>	Avoid the “thesis killer” words ² (many, very, things, a lot, big, large, huge, etc.).
	1E	Thesis paragraph is thesis only, no “preview/road map” of the rest of the essay		While having a thesis helps define your essay, the rest of the thesis paragraph helps organize the rest of the essay, categorizing the evidence that later paragraphs will more completely develop. Here's an example: <i>Chinese peasants responded positively toward Buddha's message, but aristocrats and those with a vested interest in the status quo rejected Buddhism. During politically uncertain times, nirvana was seen as 'enough' to satisfy converts, while after political stability was restored, Buddhist converts came under increasing pressure to defend and justify their faith.</i>

¹ See Sherry Watkins' “Writing Prompts” for a great table explaining the verb in many essay prompts.

² I have a rule in my classroom, “Any thesis that contains the words ‘very,’ ‘many,’ or ‘things’ is automatically vetoed.” Possibly the hardest skill to learn is the ability to form a sophisticated, complex thesis. One tactic I've learned (from Geri McCarthy of Barrington, RI) is to require students to begin their thesis with either “While”, “Although”, or “Despite/In spite of.” These words strongly encourage students to formulate a mature thesis that helps structure the rest of their essay. Once students can consistently write competent thesis sentences, then I concentrate on having them develop an essay “road map” (outline) of later paragraphs. The result should be a thesis paragraph that is several sentences long (the paragraph should NOT just be a single sentence).

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Category	Mistake		Example	How to Fix It
<p style="text-align: center;">2 Meaning of Doc's</p>	2A	Document(s) not referenced or used at all in the essay	Essay never mentions a document, explicitly or implicitly.	Pre-writing organization. As you outline your essay, note which doc's support each paragraph topic. If you still don't use a doc, add a topic to include the unused doc.
	2B	Misinterpretation of document	<i>The Anonymous Chinese Scholar (Doc #3) is clearly attacking Buddhism. The questions are hostile and meant to drive people away from Buddhism.</i>	Practice, practice, practice. Read documents of all sorts: text, photographs, maps, political cartoons, charts & graphs, etc. Note: This is not a fatal error. You CAN misinterpret 1 document and still earn this point.
	2C	Documents used inappropriately	<i>Doc #2 says ...</i>	Don't begin any sentence with the word "document." In fact, don't even use the word "document" in your essay. Simply list (Doc #2) in parentheses at the end of a sentence that uses evidence from a doc in your argument. One way to help yourself focus on the question is to identify the question's verb. Often the verb is "analyze" "Analyze" is DIFFERENT than "summarize." Most students merely summarize rather than analyzing. "Summarize" = "what happened" "Analyze" = "why it happened." Another tactic to help yourself answer the question is to break the question into it's specific parts. Each question has a <i>what</i> , a <i>where</i> , and a <i>when</i> . Every sentence in your essays <u>must</u> relate to the question. You must not get off track and talk about a slightly different <i>where</i> , or a <i>when</i> that you heard a great story about, or a <i>what</i> that you know a ton of information about. <u>Anything you write that does not "answer the question" is irrelevant</u> , and will not help your score, no matter how well written or informative. Don't waste your time writing irrelevant information! Plan MORE, write LESS.

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3 Evidence	3A	No specific evidence used from documents		Pre-writing organization should include a brief outline of each paragraph, including topic sentences. Once you know what each paragraph will discuss, note which doc's contain information relevant to that paragraph.
	3B	Evidence used from documents unrelated to the thesis.		Probably caused by lack of clear thesis and/or lack of pre-writing organization.
	3C	Excessive quoting or paraphrasing of documents	<i>As Zhi Dun says in Doc #2, "[followed by 3 lines of text]"</i>	Try to use only a few words at most from a document. Keep in mind, your teacher/reader knows the documents better than you do. What can 3 lines of quoting the doc <i>do</i> ? (It can start to seem like you're just trying to pad your essay to make it <i>look</i> longer.)
	3D	Summarizing documents (aka "Plot Summary")	<i>Doc #1 says ...blah blah blah Doc #2 says ...blah blah blah Doc #3 says ...blah blah blah Doc #4 says ...blah blah blah</i>	Virtually any paragraph/sentence that begins, "Doc # says ..." is guilty of <u>summarizing</u> documents rather than <u>using evidence to support the thesis</u> . Even worse is when the 1 st paragraph begins, "Doc #1 says ...," followed by the 2 nd paragraph, "Doc #2 says ..." This is what teachers/readers call a "laundry list" essay. It's merely a straight summation of each individual document. (Which is precisely what the directions say NOT to do!)

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Category	Mistake		Example	How to Fix It
4 Context, Source Analysis (POV³)	4A	No context/ POV given		POV is really a very sophisticated skill. Don't despair, you CAN do this, but it will take work. (see below)
	4B	Attribution only	<i>Zhi Dun (Doc #2) is biased because he is a scholar and confidant of aristocrats and high officials.</i> These words are quoted directly from the document. Merely repeating the words already printed in the document doesn't count.	<p style="text-align: center;">All this is summarized in the SOAPStone acronym.</p> <p>Some good questions to ask in order to analyze POV are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) WHO produced it? Discuss the author's gender, age, ethnicity, social status, religion, intellectual or political beliefs, etc. 2) WHEN was it produced? Can it be connected with a significant historical event? 3) Who was the intended audience? Was the document written privately, written to be read or heard by others (who?), an official document for a ruler to read, commissioned painting, etc. 4) WHY? What was the motivation of the writer/producer of the document, based on what you can surmise about them?
	4C	Quoting or paraphrasing documents	<i>Doc #1 says ... [blah blah blah] Doc #2 says ... Doc #3 says ... Doc #4 says ...</i>	<p>When you put all these together, you get the POV, why THIS person would be producing THIS piece of information at THIS time. Then you can evaluate how much you "trust" the information in the document, or what you think was really going on.</p> <p>Note: It is useful to consider the tone/vocabulary of the document, just as you would in analyzing a piece of literature. It will sometimes convey the intent, the point of view of the author (anger, disdain, admiration, satire, etc.).⁴</p>

³ Special Note: Occasionally students attempt to 'Group Analyze POV' by saying that 3 doc's all share a particular POV. While this statement earns credit for "Analyze by Grouping," it does not "double dip" to earn POV credit as well. Both point #4 (POV) and #5 (Grouping) require analysis, but there is a subtle and important difference between the two types of analyses. POV applies to the author/audience behind a single document, while Analysis by Grouping applies to a specific characteristic shared by multiple documents.

⁴ These POV methods and comments are from Ane Lintvedt's AP World History Electronic Discussion Group message, 4/28/2004.

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5 Content Analysis (aka ‘Grouping’)	5A	No groups exist		Pre-writing planning and organization.
	5B	Groups implied only by essay structure, not explicitly stated	1 st part of essay discusses the positives, the 2 nd part the negatives.	This does show at least a little organization, so it’s better than nothing, but be more explicit and sophisticated..
	5C	Grouping only of whole documents, not specific characteristics of the documents	<i>Doc’s 1, 3, & 6 all belong in one group.</i>	Be more specific! Name the specific <u>characteristic</u> that is shared by the documents. (e.g. “ <i>Supporters of Buddhism like the Anonymous Chinese scholar and Zong Mi ignored or at least de-emphasized Buddhism’s non-Chinese origins, (Doc’s 3, & 5) even as they had to defend Buddhism from attacks by supporters of ‘native’ Chinese Confucianism. (Doc’s 4, 6)”</i>
	5D	“Group” includes only 1 document		<u>Each paragraph must refer to at least 2 documents.</u>
	<p style="text-align: center;">What IS Content Analysis? (And how is it different from ‘Grouping’?)</p> <p>Content Analysis requires students to look for some CHARACTERISTIC that multiple documents share, then create a group under the title of that characteristic. DON’T group <u>whole</u> documents, analyze characteristics OF documents. (That’s why one document can belong to more than one group.)</p> <p>Here’s a good exercise to practice this: Organize the doc’s into at least 3 groups, BUT (here’s the tricky part) ONE of the docs must belong in ALL the groups. That way one has to analyze doc #x, and see that it really has several different characteristics: Characteristic #1 makes it belong in Group A; Characteristic #2 makes it belong in Group B, etc. THAT’S real content analysis!</p> <p>So what’s the difference between Context Analysis (POV) and Content Analysis (Grouping)? Context Analysis (POV) focuses on the intangible The difference is scale. POV focuses/analyzes “within the box” (1 doc), while Content Analysis analyzes “across the boxes” (seeing characteristics or trends in several docs that aren’t apparent in any one single document).</p>			

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6 Additional Document	6A	No additional document requested.		Earning the Additional Document point is so easy, failing to earn this rubric point should be a crime. All it takes is one sentence to describe the additional document, and a second sentence to describe how an historian would use it to more fully answer the question.
	6B	No reason/justification stated for the additional document.	<i>It would be good to have a document from a peasant.</i>	Describe what the missing document might be and <u>how</u> an historian might <u>use</u> it. (<u>Why</u> would it be good to hear from a peasant? How do you think a peasant might have thought about these issues <u>differently</u> from any of the given documents? What questions would an historian be able to answer with a peasant's perspective that aren't possible to answer now?) <i>It would be nice to see a document from a Buddhist peasant during the time of political instability, in order to see how their motive in choosing Buddhism over more traditional Confucianism compares with Han Yu's (Doc #4) and Emperor Wu's (Doc 6) motives."</i>